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ABSTRACT

This paper presents research that will assist educators in addressing children's needs in relation to dealing with traumas. It will aid educators and steer them in the proper direction in order to develop programs that address these needs within the school system. Parents and adult caregivers are the primary resources for identifying children at risk; however, the school environment is the setting where many symptoms are likely to emerge. Not all trauma survivors require treatment, but it is important for teachers and parents to work together to identify those individuals who need treatment or services. The Preventive Intervention Strategy instrument outlines symptomatic responses and first aid interventions based on age groups. Understanding the strategy has real classroom applications that may assist children who are at risk. By using the recommended techniques, educators can begin to facilitate a healing process and have a strategy for identifying children who may need more systematic treatment by psychological professionals. (Contains 10 references.) (JDM)

How a National Tragedy Can Psychologically Impact Children

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How can an elementary school respond to individual child needs in the face of a national tragedy?

Americans were not prepared for the events that took place on September 11, 2001 and it shocked, outraged and affected our entire nation. The acts of terrorism not only destroyed two icons of American capitalism and needlessly took thousands of lives, it took away the innocence of the United States.

Society was forever changed and those changes are already reflected in the schools. Since schools are an integral part of society, it is imperative for educators to respond to the individual needs of children during this tragedy. It is of paramount importance for the schools to address this need because the United States has proposed a "war on terrorism". Our government has warned us that this may be a long battle and casualties will be sustained in the name of liberty and justice for all.

Due to the fact that acts of terrorism on the United States are a relatively new phenomenon, there is a limited amount of research or empirical data to provide a pathway for guidance. What we do know, is how children in general respond to trauma. The National Institute of Mental Health (2001) states, "Youngsters who have experienced a catastrophic event often need support from parents and teachers to avoid long term emotional harm. Most will recover in a short time, but the minority who develop PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) or other persistent problems need treatment".

This research will assist educators in addressing children's needs in relation to dealing with traumas. It will aid educators and steer them in the proper direction in order to develop programs that address these needs within the school system.

Family support is a critical component in helping children come to terms with traumatic events. Parents and adult caregivers are the primary resource for identifying children at risk, however, the school environment is the setting where many PTSD and associated symptoms are likely to emerge. It is important that teachers and parents work together in identifying individual needs and referrals for children in need of additional treatment. Not all trauma survivors require treatment, there are many contributing factors that may predispose some to exhibit symptoms requiring intervention.

Recent research concludes that (Morrison, 2000) the impact of trauma is likely to be the greatest in children who have previously been the victim of child abuse or some other trauma, a child who has already had a mental health problem, and youngsters who lack family support. According to (Shannon et al., 1994) and (Pfefferbaum et al., 1999; Pfefferbaum et al., 2000) gender has also been known to be a factor. Findings from a study of the Oklahoma City bombing indicate that, more severe reactions to PTSD were related to the female gender. Exposure through knowing someone injured or killed, and bomb related television viewing/media exposure have also been significant contributing factors to the development of PTSD (It is important for educators to be knowledgeable of symptomatic responses, psychological and emotional issues so that they can identify children at risk and to act as a resource for parents and caretakers.

Robert Pynoos and Kathi Nader have created a Preventive Intervention Strategy instrument which outlines symptomatic responses and first aid interventions broken out by age groups (Pyrnoos & Nader, 1988). Understanding the strategy has real classroom applications that may assist children who are at risk. According to Pynoos and Nader (1988) "school classrooms are an optimum setting to identify children at risk for posttrauma stress reactions. To minimize the fear

of recurrence and its continued interference with everyday activities or tasks, and to normalize the recovery process". The classroom can be a safe place where children can learn to accept, work through and understand the traumatic event and find collective comfort. The technique of drawing-and-story telling (Nader & Pyroos, 1990) allows identification of traumatic imagery and is a medium to introduce discussions of a traumatic event in non-threatening way by using the child as the story teller. In this way, educators can begin to facilitate a healing process and have a strategy for identifying children who may need more systematic treatment by psychological professionals.

Preventive Intervention Strategies

Symptomatic response/issue

First aid

Preschool through Grade 2

1. Helplessness and passivity
2. Generalized fear
3. Cognitive confusion
4. Difficulty identifying feelings
5. Lack of verbalization
6. Reminders become magical
7. Sleep disturbance
8. Anxious detachment
9. Regressive symptoms
10. Anxieties about death

1. Support, rest, comfort
2. Protective shield
3. Repeated clarifications
4. Emotional labels
5. Help to verbalize
6. Demystification of reminders
7. Telling parents/teachers
8. Consistent care taking
9. Time-limited regression
10. Explanations of death

Grades 3 - 5

1. Responsibility and guilt
2. Reminders trigger fears
3. Traumatic play and retelling
4. Fear of feelings
5. Concentration/learning
6. Sleep disturbance
7. Safety concerns
8. Changes in behavior
9. Somatic complaints
10. Monitoring parents anxieties

1. Expression of imaginings
2. Identification of reminders
3. Listening with understanding
4. Supported expression
5. Telling adults
6. Help to understand
7. Realistic information
8. Challenge to impulse control
9. Link between sensations and event
10. Expression of concerns

- 11. Concern for others
- 12. Disturbed by grief responses

- 11. Constructive activities
- 12. Positive memories

Most schools have emergency evacuation plans and some may have contingency plans for disaster, violence or crisis but as a society we are not prepared for terrorist attacks. The continued threat of terrorism is haunting American society. The repercussions of the fear of terrorism is felt in our homes and reflected in our schools. As educators, we must be able to quickly and clearly identify the needs of our students so that we can fulfill our mission of learning. In order to meet that objective, teachers will need to be educated on posttraumatic stress disorder, the signs, symptoms and its manifestations. In addition, they need to monitor their students and classrooms more efficiently and to be a keen observer to pick up the subtle clues that indicate that a child might be at risk. More research is needed in this area to guide teachers in this new era so they become better equipped as educators.

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